

U U U

G O O D

THE EVOLUTION OF

R A A R

ROBERT WRIGHT
*Author of *The Moral Animal* and *Nonzero**

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ALSO BY ROBERT WRIGHT

Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny

The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life

Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in the Age of Information

For John,
my odometer monitor

The partner in the dialogue with God is not the individual man but the human species as a whole.

—*Gordon Kaufman*

Introduction

I was once denounced from the pulpit of my mother's church. The year was 1994. My book *The Moral Animal* had just been published, and I'd been lucky enough to have it excerpted in *Time* magazine. The excerpt was about the various ways in which our evolved human nature complicates the project of marriage. One such complication is the natural, universally human temptation to stray, and that is the angle *Time*'s editors chose to feature on the magazine's cover. Alongside a stark image of a broken wedding band were the words "Infidelity: It may be in our genes."

The pastor of the First Baptist Church in Santa Rosa, California, saw this article as a godless defense of philandering and said so one Sunday morning. After the service, my mother went forward and told him that her son was the author of the article. I'm willing to bet that—such are the wonders of maternal love—she said it with pride.

How far I had fallen! Back around age nine, at the Immanuel Baptist Church in El Paso, Texas, I had felt the call of God and walked to the front of the church as a visiting evangelist named Homer Martinez issued the "invitation"—the call for unredeemed sinners to accept Jesus as their savior. A few weeks later I was baptized by the church's minister. Now, nearly three decades later, another Baptist minister was placing me in the general vicinity of Satan.

I doubt that, if this minister had read my *Time* piece carefully, he would have come down so hard on it. (I had actually argued that the adulterous impulse, though natural, can and should be resisted.) On the other hand, there were people who read not just the excerpt but the whole book and concluded that I was a godless something or other. I had argued that the most ethereal, uplifting parts of human existence (love, sacrifice, our very sense of moral truth) were products of natural selection. The book seemed like a thoroughly materialist tract—materialist as in "scientific materialist," as in "Science can explain everything in material terms, so who needs a God? Especially a God who is alleged to somehow magically transcend the material universe."

I guess "materialist" is a not-very-misleading term for me. In fact, in this book I talk about the history of religion, and its future, from a materialist standpoint. I think the origin and development of religion can be explained by reference to concrete, observable things—human nature, political and economic factors, technological change, and so on.

But I don't think a "materialist" account of religion's origin, history, and future—like the one I'm giving here—precludes the validity of a religious worldview. In fact, I contend that the history of religion presented in this book, materialist though it is, actually affirms the validity of a religious worldview; not a *traditionally* religious worldview, but a worldview that is in some meaningful sense religious.

It sounds paradoxical. On the one hand, I think gods arose as illusions, and that the subsequent history of the idea of god is, in some sense, the evolution of an illusion. On the other hand: (1) the story of this evolution itself points to the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity; and (2) the "illusion," in the course of evolving, has gotten streamlined in a way that moved it closer to plausibility. In both of these senses, the illusion has gotten less and less illusory.

Does that make sense? Probably not. I hope it will by the end of the book. For now I should just concede that the kind of god that remains plausible, after all this streamlining, is not the kind of god

that most religious believers currently have in mind.

There are two other things that I hope will make a new kind of sense by the end of this book, and both are aspects of the current world situation.

One is what some people call a clash of civilizations—the tension between the Judeo-Christian West and the Muslim world, as conspicuously manifested on September 11, 2001. Ever since that day people have been wondering how, if at all, the world's Abrahamic religions can get along with one another as globalization forces them into closer and closer contact.

Well, history is full of civilizations clashing, and for that matter, of civilizations not clashing. And the story of the role played by religious ideas—fanning the flames or dampening the flames, and often changing in the process—is instructive. I think it tells us what we can do to make the current “clash” more likely to have a happy ending.

The second aspect of the current world situation I'll address is another kind of clash—the much-discussed “clash” between science and religion. Like the first kind of clash, this one has a long and instructive history. It can be traced at least as far back as ancient Babylon, where eclipses that had long been attributed to restless and malignant supernatural beings were suddenly found to occur at predictable intervals—predictable enough to make you wonder whether restless and malignant supernatural beings were really the problem.

There have been many such unsettling (from religion's point of view) discoveries since then, but always some notion of the divine has survived the encounter with science. The notion has had to change, but that's no indictment of religion. After all, science has changed relentlessly, revising if not discarding old theories, and none of us think of that as an indictment of science. On the contrary, we think this ongoing adaptation is carrying science closer to the truth. Maybe the same thing is happening to religion. Maybe, in the end, a mercilessly scientific account of our predicament—such as the account that got me denounced from the pulpit of my mother's church—is actually compatible with a truly religious worldview, and is part of the process that refines a religious worldview, moving it closer to truth.

These two big “clash” questions can be put into one sentence: Can religions in the modern world reconcile themselves to one another, and can they reconcile themselves to science? I think their history points to affirmative answers.

What would religions look like after such an adaptation? This question is surprisingly easy to answer, at least in broad outline. First, they'll have to address the challenges to human psychological well-being that are posed by the modern world. (Otherwise they won't win acceptance.) Second, they'll have to highlight some “higher purpose”—some kind of larger point or pattern that we can use to help us orient our daily lives, recognize good and bad, and make sense of joy and suffering alike. (Otherwise they won't be religions, at least not in the sense that I mean the word “religion.”)

Now for the really hard questions. *How* will religions manage these feats? (Assuming they do; and if they don't, then all of us—believers, agnostics, and atheists alike—may be in big trouble.) How will religions adapt to science and to one another? What would a religion well suited to an age of advanced science and rapid globalization look like? What kind of purpose would it point to, what kind of orientation would it provide? Is there an intellectually honest worldview that truly qualifies as religious and can, amid the chaos of the current world, provide personal guidance and comfort—and maybe even make the world less chaotic? I don't claim to have the answers, but clear clues emerge naturally in the course of telling the story of God. So here goes.

THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF GODS

In summing up, then, it may be said that nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion.

—*Emile Durkheim*

The Primordial Faith

The Chukchee, a people indigenous to Siberia, had their own special way of dealing with unruly winds. A Chukchee man would chant, “Western Wind, look here! Look down on my buttocks. We are going to give you some fat. Cease blowing!” The nineteenth-century European visitor who reported this ritual described it as follows: “The man pronouncing the incantation lets his breeches fall down, and bucks leeward, exposing his bare buttocks to the wind. At every word he claps his hands.” ¹

By the end of the nineteenth century, European travelers had compiled many accounts of rituals in faraway and scarcely known lands. Some of these lands were inhabited by people known as savages—people whose technology didn’t include writing or even agriculture. And some of their rituals seemed like this one, strange.

Could a ritual like this be called religious? Some Europeans bridled at the thought, offended by the implied comparison between their elevated forms of worship and crude attempts to appease nature.

Maybe that’s why Sir John Lubbock, a late-nineteenth-century British anthropologist, prefaced his discussion of “savage” religion with a warning. “It is impossible to discuss the subject without mentioning some things which are very repugnant to our feelings,” he wrote in *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*. But he made his readers a promise. In exploring this “melancholy spectacle of gross superstitions and ferocious forms of worship,” he would “endeavour to avoid, as far as possible, anything which might justly give pain to any of my readers.” ²

One pain Lubbock spared his readers was the thought that their brains might have much in common with savage brains. “The whole mental condition of a savage is so different from ours, that it is often very difficult to follow what is passing in his mind, or to understand the motives by which he is influenced.” Though savages do “have a reason, such as it is, for what they do and what they believe, their reasons often are very absurd.” The savage evinces “extreme mental inferiority,” and his mind, “like that of the child, is easily fatigued.” ³ Naturally, then, the savage’s religious ideas are “not the result of deep thought.”

So there was reassurance aplenty for Lubbock’s readers: “Religion, as understood by the lower savage races,” is not only different from civilized religion “but even opposite.” Indeed, if we bestow the title “religion” on the coarse rituals and superstitious fears that observers of savage society have reported, then “we can no longer regard religion as peculiar to man.” For the “baying of a dog to the moon is as much an act of worship as some ceremonies which have been so described by travellers.”

Maybe it shouldn’t surprise us that a well-educated British Christian would so disparage elements of “primitive religion.” (“Primitive religion” denotes the religion of nonliterate peoples broadly, whether hunter-gatherer or agrarian.) After all, in primitive religion there is deep reverence for raw superstition. Obscure omens often govern decisions of war and peace. And the spirits of the dead may make mischief—or may, via the mediation of a shaman, offer counsel. In short, primitive religion is full of the stuff that was famously thrust aside when the monotheism carried out of Egypt by Moses displaced the paganism of Canaan.

But, actually, that displacement wasn’t so clear-cut, and the proof is in the Bible itself, albeit parts of the Bible that aren’t much read by modern believers. There you’ll find Israel’s first king, Saul, going incognito to a medium and asking her to raise the prophet Samuel from the grave for policy

input. (Samuel isn't amused: "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?")⁵ There you'll also find raw superstition. When the prophet Elisha, preparing King Joash for battle against the Arameans, tells him to strike the ground with some arrows, he is disappointed with the resulting three strikes: "You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Aram until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Aram only three times."⁶

Even the ultimate in Abrahamic theological refinement—monotheism itself—turns out to be a feature of the Bible that comes and goes. Though much of the scripture assumes the existence of only one God, some parts strike a different tone. The book of Genesis recalls the time when a bunch of male deities came down and had sex with attractive human females; these gods "went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them." (And not ordinary children: "These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.")⁷

Here and elsewhere, the Hebrew Bible—the earliest scripture in the Abrahamic tradition, and in that sense the starting point for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—holds telling remnants of its ancestry. Apparently Abrahamic monotheism grew organically out of the "primitive" by a process more evolutionary than revolutionary.

This doesn't mean there's a line of cultural descent between the "primitive" religions on the anthropological record and the "modern" religions. It's not as if three or four millennia ago, people who had been talking to the wind while pulling their pants down started talking to God while kneeling. For all we know, the cultural ancestry of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam includes no tradition of talking to the wind at all, and certainly there's no reason to think that Chukchee religion is part of that ancestry—that back in the first or second millennium BCE, Chukchee culture in Siberia somehow influenced Middle Eastern culture.

Rather, the idea is that "primitive" religion broadly, as recorded by anthropologists and other visitors, can give us some idea of the ancestral milieu of modern religions. Through the happenstance of geographic isolation, cultures such as the Chukchee escaped the technological revolution—the advent of writing—that placed other parts of the world on the historical record and pushed them toward modernity. If these "primitive" cultures don't show us the particular prehistoric religions out of which the early recorded religions emerged, they at least give us a general picture. Though monotheistic prayer didn't grow out of Chukchee rituals or beliefs, maybe the logic of monotheistic prayer did grow out of a *kind* of belief the Chukchee held, the notion that forces of nature are animated by minds or spirits that you can influence through negotiation.

Savage Logic

This, in fact, was the theory of one of John Lubbock's contemporaries, Edward Tylor, a hugely influential thinker who is sometimes called the founder of social anthropology. Tylor, an acquaintance and sometime critic of Lubbock's, believed that the primordial form of religion was "animism." Tylor's theory of animism was among scholars of his day the dominant explanation of how religion began. It "conquered the world at one blow,"⁸ one early-twentieth-century anthropologist wrote.

Tylor's theory was grounded in a paradigm that pervaded anthropology in the late nineteenth century, then fell out of favor for many decades, and lately has made a comeback: cultural evolutionism. The idea is that human culture as broadly defined—art, politics, technology, religion, and so on—evolves in much the way biological species evolve: new cultural traits arise and may flourish or perish, and as a result whole institutions and belief systems form and change. A new

religious ritual can appear and gain a following (if, say, it is deemed an effective wind neutralizer). New gods can be born and then grow. New ideas about gods can arise—like the idea that there's only one of them. Tylor's theory of animism aimed to explain how this idea, monotheism, had evolved out of primitive religion.

“Animism” is sometimes defined as the attribution of life to the inanimate—considering rivers and clouds and stars alive. This is part of what Tylor meant by the term, but not all. The primitive animists in Tylor's scheme, saw living and nonliving things alike as inhabited by—animated by—a soul or spirit; rivers and clouds, birds and beasts, and people, too, had this “ghost-soul,” this “vapour, film, or shadow,” this “cause of life and thought in the individual it animates.” ⁹

Tylor's theory rested on a more flattering view of the “primitive” mind than Lubbock held. (Tylor is credited with a doctrine that became a pillar of social anthropology—the “psychic unity of mankind,” the idea that people of all races are basically the same, that there is a universal human nature.) He saw animism not as bizarrely inconsistent with modern thought, but as a natural early product of the same speculative curiosity that had led to modern thought. Animism had been the “infant philosophy of mankind,” assembled by “ancient savage philosophers.” ¹⁰ It did what good theories are supposed to do: explain otherwise mysterious facts economically.

To begin with, the hypothesis that humans have a ghost-soul handily answers some questions that in Tylor's view, must have occurred to early humans, such as: What is happening when you dream? Primitive societies use the notion of the human soul to solve this puzzle. In some cases the idea is that the dreamer's ghost-soul wanders during sleep, having the adventures the dreamer later recalls; decades after Tylor wrote, the anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown observed that Andaman Islanders were reluctant to awaken people, since illness might ensue if sleep was interrupted before the soul came home. ¹¹ In other cases, the idea is that the dreamer is being visited by the souls of others. In Fiji, Tylor noted, people's souls were thought to leave their bodies “to trouble other people in their sleep.” ¹²

And the idea that the souls of dead people return to visit via dreams is widespread in primitive societies. ¹³ Thus animism handles another enigma that confronted early human beings: death itself. Death, in this scenario, is what happens when the soul checks out of the body for good.

Once early humans had conceived the idea of the soul, Tylor said, extending it beyond our species was only logical. The savage couldn't help but “recognise in beasts the very characteristics which it attributes to the human soul, namely, the phenomena of life and death, will and judgement.” And plants, “partaking with animals the phenomena of life and death, health and sickness, not unnaturally have some kind of soul ascribed to them.” ¹⁴

For that matter, the idea that sticks and stones have souls is rational if viewed from the standpoint of “an uncultured tribe.” After all, don't sticks and stones appear in dreams? Don't ghosts that we see while dreaming, or while delirious with fever, wear clothes or carry weapons? “How then can we charge the savage with far-fetched absurdity for taking into his philosophy and religion an opinion which rests on the very evidence of his senses?” Tylor may have had Lubbock in mind when he said of primitive peoples, “The very assertion that their actions are motiveless, and their opinions nonsense, is itself a theory, and, I hold, a profoundly false one, invented to account for all manner of things which those who did not understand them could thus easily explain.” ¹⁵

Once a broadly animistic worldview had taken shape, Tylor believed, it started to evolve. At some point, for example, the notion of each tree having a spirit gave way to the notion of trees being collectively governed by “the god of the forest.” ¹⁶ This incipient polytheism then matured and

eventually got streamlined into monotheism. In 1866, in an article in the *Fortnightly Review*, Tylor summed up the whole process in what may be the only one-sentence history of religion ever published—and may also be one of the longest sentences of any kind ever published:

Upwards from the simplest theory which attributes life and personality to animal, vegetable, and mineral alike—through that which gives to stone and plant and river guardian spirits which live among them and attend to their preservation, growth, and change—up to that which sees in each department of the world the protecting and fostering care of an appropriate divinity, and at last of one Supreme Being ordering and controlling the lower hierarchy—through all these gradations of opinion we may thus see fought out, in one stage after another, the long-waged contest between a theory of animation which accounts for each phenomenon of nature by giving it everywhere a life like our own, and a slowly-growing natural science which in one department after another substitutes for independent voluntary action the working out of systematic law. [17](#)

Any questions?

There have been lots of them, actually. Tylor's theory hasn't kept the stature it once held. Some complain that it makes the evolution of gods sound like an exercise in pure reason, when in fact religion has been deeply shaped by many factors, ranging from politics to economics to the human emotional infrastructure. (One difference between modern cultural evolutionism and that of Tylor's day is the modern emphasis on the various ways that “memes”—rituals, beliefs, and other basic elements of culture—spread by appealing to nonrational parts of human nature.)

Still, in one broad sense Tylor's view holds up well today. However diverse the forces that shape religion, its early impetus indeed seems to have come largely from people who, like us, were trying to make sense of the world. But they didn't have the heritage of modern science to give them a head start, so they reached prescientific conclusions. Then, as understanding of the world grew—especially as it grew via science—religion evolved in reaction. Thus, Tylor wrote, does “an unbroken line of mental connexion” unite “the savage fetish-worshiper and the civilized Christian.” [18](#)

At this level of generality, Tylor's worldview has not just survived the scrutiny of modern scholarship, but drawn strength from it. Evolutionary psychology has shown that, bizarre as some “primitive” beliefs may sound—and bizarre as some “modern” religious beliefs may sound to atheists and agnostics—they are natural outgrowths of humanity, natural products of a brain built by natural selection to make sense of the world with a hodgepodge of tools whose collective output isn't wholly rational.

Elaboration on the modern understanding of how “primitive” religion first emerged from the human mind can be found in the appendix of this book. For now the main point is that, even if Tylor's animism-to-monotheism scenario looks deficient from a modern vantage point, there is still much in it that makes sense. In particular: to understand the early stages in the evolution of gods, and of God, we have to imagine how the world looked to people living many millennia ago, not just before science, but before writing or even agriculture; and there is no better aid to that thought experiment than immersing ourselves in the worldview of hunter-gatherer societies that have been observed by anthropologists—the world-view of “savages,” as both Lubbock and Tylor would say.

Of course, it would be nice to observe *literally* prehistoric societies, the societies whose religion actually did evolve into the ancient religions on the historical record. But there can't be detailed records of beliefs that existed before writing; all that is left is the stuff archaeologists find—tools and

trinkets and, here and there, a cave painting. If the vast blank left by humanity's preliterate phase is to be filled, it will have to be filled by the vast literature on observed hunter-gatherer societies.

Using hunter-gatherers as windows on the past has its limits. For example, the anthropological record contains no "pristine" hunter-gatherer cultures, cultures wholly uncorrupted by contact with more technologically advanced societies. After all, the process of observing a culture involves contact with it. Besides, many hunter-gatherer societies had been contacted by missionaries or explorers before anyone started documenting their religions.

Then again, to the extent that the religious beliefs of an indigenous culture seem "strange"—bear little resemblance to the beliefs of the cultures that have contacted it—then this contact is an unlikely explanation for them. The practice of offering bare buttocks to the wind, for example, seems unlikely to have been taught to the Chukchee by a Christian missionary from Victorian England.

When a "strange" category of belief is found in hunter-gatherer societies on various continents, then it is even less likely to be a mere import, and more likely to be a genuine product of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. As we're about to see, there is no shortage of hunter-gatherer notions that pass these two tests: they are widespread and—to our eyes—strange. So with fair confidence we can reconstruct the spiritual landscape of prehistoric times, back before religion entered the historical record.

No one any longer believes, as some nineteenth-century anthropologists did, that observed hunter-gatherers are crystalline examples of religion at its moment of origin tens of thousands of years ago. But they're the best clues we'll ever have to generic religious beliefs circa 12,000 BCE, before the invention of agriculture. Cave paintings are attractive, but they don't talk.

Hunter-Gatherer Gods

The Klamath, a hunter-gatherer people in what is now Oregon, talked. And, fortunately for us, they talked to someone who understood them more clearly than visitors often understand indigenous peoples: Albert Samuel Gatschet, a pioneering linguist who in the 1870s compiled a dictionary and grammar of the Klamath language. Gatschet's writings on the Klamath capture something found in every hunter-gatherer culture: belief in supernatural beings—and always more than one of them; there is no such thing as an indigenously monotheistic hunter-gatherer society.

In fact, the anthropological record reveals at least five different *kinds* of hunter-gatherer supernatural beings, some of which are found in all hunter-gatherer societies and most of which are found in most hunter-gatherer societies. Klamath culture, with a rich theology, illustrates all five. [19](#)

Hunter-gatherer supernatural being Type I: elemental spirits. Parts of nature that modern scientists consider inanimate may be alive, possessing intelligence and personality and a soul. So the workings of nature can become a social drama. When the Klamath saw clouds obscuring the moon, it could mean that Muash, the south wind, was trying to kill the moon—and in fact might succeed, though the moon seems always to have gotten resurrected in the end.

Hunter-gatherer supernatural being Type II: puppeteers. Parts of nature may be controlled by beings distinct from the parts of nature themselves. By Klamath reckoning, the west wind was emitted by a flatulent dwarf woman, about thirty inches tall, who wore a buckskin dress and a basket hat (and who could be seen in the form of a rock on a nearby mountain). The Klamath sometimes asked her to blow mosquitoes away from Pelican Bay. [20](#)

Combining supernatural beings of types I and II into a single scenario is possible. The Klamath believed whirlwinds were driven by an internal spirit, Shukash. The nearby Modoc hunter-gatherers, while agreeing, believed that Shukash was in turn controlled by Tchitchatsa-ash, or “Big Belly,” whose stomach housed bones that rattled, creating the whirlwind’s eerie sound. ²¹ Such theological differences are found not just among different hunter-gatherer societies, but within them. Thus Lemeish, the Klamath’s thunder spirit, was sometimes spoken of as a single entity but was sometimes said to consist of five brothers who, having been banished from polite society, now made noise to scare people. (These interpretive divergences form the raw material of cultural evolution, just as biological mutations create the diverse traits that feed genetic evolution.)

Hunter-gatherer supernatural being Type III: organic spirits. Natural phenomena that even we consider alive may have supernatural powers. The coyote, for example, housed evil spirits, and, Gatschet noted, “his lugubrious voice is the presager of war, misfortune, and death.” ²² One species of bird could make snow, and another made fog. Some animal spirits could help the Klamath cure disease, a collaboration facilitated by a spirit called Yayaya-ash, which would assume the form of a one-legged man and lead a medicine man to the home of these animal spirits for consultation.

Hunter-gatherer supernatural being Type IV: ancestral spirits. Hunter-gatherer societies almost always feature spirits of the deceased, and typically these spirits do at least as much bad as good. Ancestral spirits, Gatschet wrote, were “objects of dread and abomination, feelings which are increased by a belief in their omnipresence and invisibility.” ²³

Hunter-gatherer supernatural being Type V: the high god. Some hunter-gatherer societies, though by no means all, have a “high god.” This isn’t a god that controls the other gods. (One early-twentieth-century anthropologist wrote about the Klamath, with traces of disapproval: “there has been no attempt to marshal the spirits into an ordered pantheon.”) ²⁴ Rather, a high god is a god that is in some vague sense more important than other supernatural beings, and is often a creator god. For the Klamath this was Kmukamtch, who inhabited the sun. Kmukamtch created the world, then created the Klamath themselves (out of a purple berry), and continued to sustain them, though he had been known to rain burning pitch upon his creation in a fit of temper. ²⁵*

So what was the point of all these gods and/or spirits? (The line between “gods” and “spirits” is fuzzy at best. I’ll use the word “gods” broadly enough to cover both.) Obviously, one thing these gods did for the Klamath is explain the otherwise mysterious workings of nature. The above inventory of supernatural beings (just the tip of the Klamath iceberg) explains why it snows, why wind blows, why clouds obscure the moon, why thunder crashes, why dreams contain dead people, and so on. Every known hunter-gatherer society has similarly explained natural dynamics in supernatural terms—or at least in terms that we consider supernatural; for hunter-gatherers, these invisible beings are seamlessly bound to the observed world of nature, just as, in modern science, the gravitational force is seamlessly bound to the observed, orbiting moon.

This leads us to one of the more ironic properties of hunter-gatherer religion: it doesn’t exist. That is, if you asked hunter-gatherers what their religion is, they wouldn’t know what you were talking about. The kinds of beliefs and rituals we label “religious” are so tightly interwoven into their everyday thought and action that they don’t have a word for them. We may label some of their explanations of how the world works “supernatural” and others “naturalistic,” but those are our categories, not theirs. To them it seems fitting to respond to illness by trying to figure out which god

caused it, just as to us it seems fitting to look for the germ that caused it. ²⁶ This fine intertwining of the—in our terms—religious and nonreligious parts of culture would continue well into recorded history. Ancient Hebrew, the language of most of the Holy Bible, had no word for religion.

With all due respect for hunter-gatherer custom (and for ancient Hebrew), I'll continue to use words like “religion” and “supernatural” —partly for easy communication with readers who use them and partly for a deeper reason: I think the parts of hunter-gatherer life that we label “religious” are specimens of human culture that, through cultural evolution, were transmuted into modern religion.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Beyond a general interest in how the world works, hunter-gatherers evince a particular interest in the question of why *bad* things happen. According to the Haida Native Americans of the north Pacific Coast, earthquakes happen when an undersea deity's very large dog (whose job is to hold up the islands on which the Haida live) shakes itself. ²⁷ If the Mbuti pygmies of Africa's Congo region find part of the forest devoid of game, that means the *keti*, forest spirits who are avid hunters themselves, have gotten there first. ²⁸ When a !Kung Bushman of the Kalahari Desert gets sick, it is likely the work of *gauwasi*—ancestral spirits—who may be acting at the behest of a god. ²⁹

Of course, hunter-gatherers aren't the only people to have asked why bad things happen. The Christian tradition alone has generated roomfuls of treatises on this question. But hunter-gatherers do a better job of answering the question than many modern theologians; at least, the hunter-gatherers' answers are less bedeviled by paradox. Theologians in the Abrahamic lineage —Jewish, Christian, or Islamic—are constrained from the outset by a stiff premise: that reality is governed by an all-knowing, all-powerful, and good God. And why such a god, capable of curing cancer tomorrow, would instead watch innocent people suffer is a conundrum. Just ask Job, who after years of piety was hit by disaster. Unlike most innocent victims, Job was allowed to interrogate God himself about the seeming injustice of it all, yet in the end was forced to settle for this answer: you wouldn't understand. Numerous theologians have wrestled with this question at book length only to wind up agreeing.

In the hunter-gatherer universe, the problem of evil isn't so baffling, because the supernatural doesn't take the form of a single all-powerful being, much less a morally perfect one. Rather, the supernatural realm is populated by various beings that, as a rule, are strikingly like human beings: they're not always in a good mood, and the things that put them in a bad mood don't have to make much sense.

For example, Karei, thunder god of the Semang hunter-gatherers of Southeast Asia, would get irritated if he saw people combing their hair during a storm or watching dogs mate. ³⁰ On the Andaman Islands, the storm god Biliku could fly into a rage if someone melted beeswax or made a loud noise while cicadas were singing. The British anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, while studying the Andaman Islanders a century ago, noticed that they did in fact melt beeswax, hoping Biliku wouldn't notice. Radcliffe-Brown puzzled at this “variance between their precepts and their actions.” ³¹ But it's not clear that “precept” is the right word for a rule laid down by a deity that isn't a moral beacon to begin with. Radcliffe-Brown had come from a culture in which “god” meant good, but that equation is hardly universal, and among hunter-gatherers it's just about unknown.

Thus, Kmukamtch, the Klamath sun god, harbored petty resentment of his handsome adopted son, Aishish, and so spent much time and energy stealing Aishish's clothes and trying them on. (This

explains why the sun is sometimes surrounded by small puffy clouds—Aishish’s beaded garments.)³² Worse still, Kmukamtch was always trying to seduce Aishish’s wives. But that’s nothing compared to the behavior of Gaona, the high god of the !Kung hunter-gatherers of Africa, who raped his son’s wife and ate two brothers-in-law.³³

When Bad People Go Unpunished

That hunter-gatherer gods aren’t paragons of virtue helps explain an observation made by more than one anthropologist: hunter-gatherers don’t generally “worship” their gods. Indeed, they often treat their gods just like you would treat a mere human—kindly on some days, less kindly on others. The Ainu, Japan’s aborigines, would sometimes try to win divine favor with offerings of millet beer, but if the gods didn’t reciprocate with good fortune, the Ainu would threaten to withhold future beer unless things improved.³⁴ !Kung medicine men have been known to punctuate a curing dance by reproaching a god named Gauwa for bringing illness: “Uncovered penis! You are bad.”³⁵ If Gauwa (something of a bumbler) then brought the wrong medicine, a medicine man would shout, “Idiot! You have done wrong. You make me ashamed. Go away.” Crude but effective: sometimes Gauwa came back with the right medicine.³⁶

Even when hunter-gatherers do show ritualized respect for gods, the respect often seems more fearful than reverential, and the ritual not very formal. The Semang, faced with a violent thunderstorm and aware that it resulted from their having watched dogs mate or from some comparable infraction, would desperately try to make amends, gashing their shins, mixing the blood with water, tossing it in the relevant god’s general direction, and yelling, “Stop! Stop!”³⁷

Still, sometimes hunter-gatherer rituals are sufficiently solemn that you can imagine them evolving into something like a modern worship service. In the early twentieth century, when the explorer Knud Rasmussen visited some Inuit (known as Eskimo in his day), he observed the gravity with which they divined the judgments of Takanakapsaluk, goddess of the sea. At the time of his visit seals and other sea game were scarce. The sea goddess was known to withhold such bounty when the Inuit had violated her rules. (Understandably so, since their violations became dirt, drifted to the bottom of the sea, matted her hair, and shrouded her in suffocating filth.) So the Inuit assembled in a dark dwelling and closed their eyes while their shaman, behind a curtain, descended to the bottom of the sea and approached Takanakapsaluk. Upon learning the source of her pique, he returned to the Inuit and demanded to know which of them had committed the transgressions she cited. Confessions were forthcoming, so the prospects for seal hunting improved. The mood brightened.

In this case “precept,” the word Radcliffe-Brown dubiously applied to the Andaman storm god’s dictates, might be in order. The solemn air of the occasion and the tearful shame of the confessors suggest that the sea goddess’s decrees were rules whose violation was thought never justified. But even here, the precepts aren’t “moral” in the modern sense of the word, because they’re not about behaviors that actually harm other people; the sea goddess’s rules don’t discourage violence, stealing, cheating, and so forth. Rather, the rules focus on breaches of ritual. (In the case Rasmussen observed a woman had failed to throw away certain household items after having a miscarriage.) True, these violations of ritual code are *thought* to harm other people—but only because they are thought to incur supernatural wrath that falls on the violator’s neighbors. In the absence of this imagined supernatural sanction, breaking the rules would be harmless and so not obviously “immoral” in the modern sense

the term. In other words, in hunter-gatherer societies, gods by and large don't help solve moral problems that would exist in their absence.

In the nineteenth century, when European scholars started seriously studying “primitive” religion, they remarked on this absence of a clear moral dimension—the dearth of references to stealing, cheating, adultery, and the like. Edward Tylor noted in 1874 that the religions of “savage” societies were “almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainstream of practical religion.” Tylor wasn't saying that savages lack morality. He stressed that the moral standards of savages are generally “well-defined and praiseworthy.” It's just that “these ethical laws stand on their own ground of tradition and public opinion,” rather than on a religious foundation.

³⁸ As the ethnographer Lorna Marshall wrote in 1962, after observing the relationship between the !Kung and the great god Gaona: “Man's wrong-doing against man is not left to Gao!na's punishment nor is it considered to be his concern. Man corrects or avenges such wrong-doings himself in his social context. Gao!na punishes people for his own reasons, which are sometimes quite obscure.” ³⁹

This isn't to say that hunter-gatherers never use religion to discourage troublesome or destructive behavior. Some Australian aborigines used to say that the spirits are annoyed by people who are frivolous or chatter too much. ⁴⁰ And when Charles Darwin, aboard HMS *Beagle*, visited Tierra del Fuego, some of the local hunter-gatherers spoke of a giant who roamed the woods and mountains, knew everything you did, and would punish such wrongdoing as murder by summoning bad weather. As the ship's captain, Robert FitzRoy, recalled one of the locals putting it, “Rain come down—snow come down—hail come down—wind blow—blow—very much blow. Very bad to kill man.” ⁴¹

But more typical ⁴² of hunter-gatherer societies is the observation one anthropologist made about the Klamath: “Relations to the spirits have no ethical implication.” ⁴³ Even if religion is largely about morality today, it doesn't seem to have started out that way. And certainly most hunter-gatherer societies don't deploy the ultimate moral incentive, a heaven reserved for the good and a hell to house the bad. Nor is there anything like the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma, a moral scorecard that will determine your fate in the next life. There is always an afterlife in hunter-gatherer religion, but it is almost never a carrot or a stick. Often everyone's spirit winds up in the same eternal home. And in those societies where the land of the dead does have subdivisions, which one you wind up in often has—as some anthropologists have put it—more to do with how you died than with how you lived. Many Andaman Islanders believed that if you drowned, you wound up underwater, as a sea spirit, whereas otherwise you would become a jungle-roaming spirit. ⁴⁴ Haida who died by drowning would become killer whales. ⁴⁵

The general absence of moral sanction in hunter-gatherer religion isn't too puzzling. Hunter-gatherers live—as everyone lived 12,000 years ago—in intimate, essentially transparent groups. A village may consist of thirty, forty, fifty people, so many kinds of wrongdoing are hard to conceal. If you stole a man's digging stick, where would you hide it? And what would be the point of having it if you couldn't use it? And, anyway, is it worth the risk of getting caught—incurring the wrath of its owner, his family, and closest friends, and incurring the ongoing suspicion of everyone else? The fact that you have to live with these people for the rest of your life is by itself a pretty strong incentive to treat them decently. If you want them to help you out when you need help, you'd better help them out when they need help. Hunter-gatherers aren't paragons of honesty and probity, but departures from these ideals are detected often enough that they don't become a rampant problem. Social order can be preserved without deploying the power of religion.

One reason for this is that a hunter-gatherer village is the environment we're built for, the

environment natural selection “designed” the human mind for. Evolutionary psychologists tell us that human nature includes at least two basic innate mechanisms inclining us to treat people nicely. One, the product of an evolutionary dynamic known as kin selection, leads us to sacrifice for close relatives. Another, reciprocal altruism, leads us to be considerate of friends—nonkin with whom we have enduringly cooperative relationships. If you live in a hunter-gatherer village, most of the people you encounter fit into one of these two categories and so fall naturally within the compass of your decency. Yes, you will have rivals, but if they become bitter enemies, then one or the other of you may leave the group for a nearby village. And one type of relationship you definitely *won't* have in a hunter-gatherer village is an anonymous one. There are no opportunities for purse-snatching. Nor can you borrow money, hop on a bus, and head out of town.

As the anthropologist Elman Service observed in 1966, such values as love and generosity and honesty “are not preached nor buttressed by threat of religious reprisal” in these societies, “because they do not need to be.” When modern societies preach these values, they are worried “mostly about morality in the larger society, outside the sphere of kindred and close friends. Primitive people do not have these worries because they do not conceive of—do not *have*—the larger society to adjust to. Their ethic does not extend to strangers; they are simply enemies, not even people.” [46](#)

That last sentence may sound extreme, and it is definitely at odds with the many flattering depictions of indigenous peoples in movies and books. But this narrow compass of moral consideration is indeed characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies. Universal love—an ideal found in many modern religions, even if it is honored mainly in the breach—is not even an ideal in the typical hunter-gatherer society.

This book is partly about how and why the moral compass has expanded, how religions came to define larger and larger groups of people as part of the circle of moral consideration. With this understanding in hand, we'll be in a better position to gauge the prospects for the circle being expanded farther—for the Abrahamic religions, in particular, to make their peace with one another, and conceive of brotherhood accordingly.

What Religion Is

You could be excused for looking at religion in hunter-gatherer societies and, like John Lubbock, concluding that it has little in common with religion as we know it. Certainly that was the reaction of more than a few Europeans of the nineteenth century. Where was the moral dimension of religion? Where was brotherly love? Where was the reverence for—not just fear of—the divine? Where was the stately ritual? Where was the quest for inner peace? And what's with this jumble of spirits and deities doing implausible things to control parts of the world that are in fact controlled by natural law?

Still, hunter-gatherer religions have at least two features that are found, in one sense or another, in all the world's great religions: they try to explain why bad things happen, and they thus offer a way to make things better. A Christian prayer on behalf of a gravely ill child may seem a more subtle instrument than the !Kung medicine man's profane confrontation of a !Kung god, but at some level the logic is the same: good and bad outcomes are under the control of a supernatural being, and the being is subject to influence. And those Christians who, in the spirit of modernism, refrain from asking God for earthly interventions are usually hoping for favorable treatment in the afterlife. Even Buddhists who don't believe in any gods (and most Buddhists do) seek through meditation or other disciplines a spiritual adjustment that renders them less susceptible to suffering.

It may seem cynical to see all religion as basically self-serving. And indeed the idea has been put pithily by a famous cynic. H. L. Mencken said of religion, “Its single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him.... Nothing else is essential.”⁴⁷ But less cynical people have also put self-interest at the core of religion, if in loftier language. About a century ago, the psychologist William James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that religion “consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”⁴⁸

The difference between Mencken’s and James’s formulations is important. In Mencken’s version the object of the game is to change the behavior of the supernatural beings. James’s version doesn’t quite exclude this possibility, but it places more of the burden of change on us; we are to “harmoniously adjust” ourselves to the “unseen order.” James seems to be making the modern assumption that the unseen order—the divine, as people say these days—is inherently good; that discrepancies between divine designs and our own aims reflect shortcomings on our part.

Of course, religion has in one sense or another always been about self-interest. Religious doctrines can’t survive if they don’t appeal to the psychology of the people whose brains harbor them, and self-interest is one potent source of appeal. But self-interest can assume many forms, and for that matter it can be aligned, or not aligned, with many other interests: the interest of the family, the interest of the society, the interest of the world, the interest of moral and spiritual truth. Religion almost always forms a link between self-interest and some of those other interests, but which ones it links to, and how, change over time. And over time there has been—on balance, taking the long view—a pattern in the change. Religion has gotten closer to moral and spiritual truth, and for that matter more compatible with scientific truth. Religion hasn’t just evolved; it has matured. One premise of this book is that the story of religion, beginning back in the Stone Age, is to some extent a movement from Mencken to James.

Religion needs to mature more if the world is going to survive in good shape—and for that matter if religion is to hold the respect of intellectually critical people. But before we take up these questions we’ll address the question of how it has matured to date: how we got from the hunter-gatherer religions that were the norm 12,000 years ago to the monotheism that is the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Then we’ll be in position to ponder the future of religion and to talk about how true it is or can be.

Chapter Two

The Shaman

There is in the world today a great and mysterious force that shapes the fortunes of millions of people. It is called the stock market. There are people who claim to have special insights into this force. They are called stock analysts. Most of them have often been wrong about the market's future behavior, and many of them have been wrong most of the time. In fact, it's not clear that their advice is worth anything at all. Reputable economists have argued that you're better off picking stocks randomly than seeking guidance from stock analysts; either way it's the blind leading the blind, but in one case you don't have to pay a commission. ¹

Nonetheless, stock analysis is a profitable line of work, even for some manifestly inept practitioners. Why? Because whenever people sense the presence of a puzzling and momentous force they want to believe there is a way to comprehend it. If you can convince them that you're the key to comprehension, you can reach great stature.

This fact has deeply shaped the evolution of religion, and it seems to have done so since very near the beginning. Once there was belief in the supernatural, there was a demand for people who claimed to fathom it. And, judging by observed hunter-gatherer societies, there was a supply to meet the demand. Though most hunter-gatherer societies have almost no structure in the modern sense of the word—little if any clear-cut political leadership, little division of economic labor—they do have religious experts. So do societies that are a shade more technologically advanced: societies that, though not fully agricultural, supplement their hunting and gathering with gardening (“horticultural” societies) or herding.

The term most often applied to these religious experts is “shaman.” ² (The word comes from the language of the Tungus, a nomadic people of Siberia, and is sometimes translated as “one who knows.”) This label conceals some diversity. Shamans in Eurasia and northernmost North America often go into dramatic, trance-like states, as spirits possess them and speak through them before departing. Elsewhere, including much of the Americas, the shaman is less enthralled by spirits and more inclined to just commune with them via visions or dreams and then paraphrase them. ³

Similarly, the specific powers claimed by shamans show great variation. Some shamans in eastern North America could take a seed, pinch it between their thumb and finger, and project it with such force as to kill a person several miles away. ⁴ In Australia, the preferred lethal weapon was a bone, pointed at the victim after appropriate incantations. ⁵ Some Eskimo shamans could go to the moon, and some could turn into a bear. ⁶ Some Amazonian shamans could become a jaguar with help from a drug that, as described by one anthropologist, leads the shaman to lie in his hammock, “growl and pant, strike the air with claw-like fingers,” convincing bystanders that “his wandering soul has turned into a bloodthirsty feline.” ⁷ On the Andaman Islands a shaman would fight an epidemic by brandishing a burning log and instructing evil spirits to keep their distance. ⁸ In southern Alaska a Tlingit shaman would fight illness by putting on a special apron and mask, running circles around the patient while shaking a rattle and singing to a series of spirits (changing his mask with each new spirit), perhaps collapsing in exhaustion from time to time. ⁹ In Africa the !Kung San curer would dance for as long as ten hours, finally entering a trance state that converted his or her healing energy

into useful vaporous form and allowed discourse with gods or spirits of the dead. [10](#)

What unites shamans everywhere is seeking contact with an otherwise hidden world that shapes human destiny. And they tend to focus their powers on things that are important and erratic—illness, the weather, predators, prey. A Jesuit priest who encountered the Abipon of South America in the eighteenth century summarized the professed powers of their shamans: “to inflict disease and death, cure all disorders, to make known distant and future events; to cause rain, hail, and tempest; to call up the shades [souls] of the dead and consult them concerning hidden matters; to put on the form of a tiger; to handle every kind of serpent without danger, etc.” [11](#) The seminal scholar of shamanism Mircea Eliade wrote, “What is fundamental and universal is the shaman’s struggle against what we could call ‘the powers of evil.’... It is consoling and comforting to know that a member of the community is able to see what is hidden and invisible to the rest and to bring back direct and reliable information from the supernatural worlds.” [12](#)

The shaman represents a crucial step in the emergence of organized religion. He (or she, sometimes) is the link between earliest religion—a fluid amalgam of beliefs about a fluid amalgam of spirits—and what religion came to be: a distinct body of belief and practice, kept in shape by an authoritative institution. The shaman is the first step toward an archbishop or an ayatollah.

This claim won’t sit well with everyone. Today shamanism (sometimes cast as “neo-shamanism”) has a big niche in New Age spirituality, and part of its appeal is its perceived contrast with modern religion. Shamanism, in this view, harkens back to a time before industrialization had impeded communion with nature, before church hierarchies had discouraged direct experience of the divine by making themselves official conduits to the sacred. In this view, the primordial, shamanic phase of religion was a little like the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve ruined everything.

Certainly the annals of shamanism do include attractive themes. Some serious scholars see in the Stone Age shaman the origins of mysticism, which in modern form has brought peace of mind to many. Eliade wrote that Eskimo shamanism and Buddhist mysticism share as their goal “deliverance from the illusions of the flesh.” [13](#) And shamanism in general, he said, is shot through with “the will to transcend the profane, individual condition” in order to recover “the very source of spiritual existence which is at once ‘truth’ and ‘life.’” [14](#)

All to the good. Still, shamans inevitably share one unfortunate characteristic with religious leaders in modern societies: being human. In the shamanistic phase of religious evolution we can see not just the sunnier side of religion, but also some of the flaws that have dogged it ever since. Religion, having come from the brains of people, is bound to bear the marks of our species, for better and worse.

How to Become a Shaman

The emergence of the shaman, of religious leadership, was a natural enough thing. Primordial religion consisted partly of people telling each other stories in an attempt to explain why good and bad things happen, to predict their happening, and if possible to intervene, thus raising the ratio of good to bad. Whenever people—hunter-gatherers, stock analysts, whatever—compete in the realm of explanation, prediction, and intervention, some of them get a reputation for success. They become leaders in their field. Through such competition did shamanhood presumably arise and sustain itself.

To judge by many observed hunter-gatherer societies, the competition was informal and ongoing, and the possession of spiritual power a matter of degree. During the all-night curing dances of the

!Kung San, any man or woman was eligible to enter a trancelike state and thus summon *num*, a spiritual healing energy. But only a minority of !Kung would become known as “masters of *num*,” and only the rarest of these was so gifted as to see the great god Gaona. ¹⁵ Among the Klamath, as one anthropologist put it, “some shamans have considerably more power than others, and everyone who has got power is in some degree capable of using it as a shaman does.” ¹⁶ The anthropologist Robert Lowie, after studying the Crow of the North American Plains, wrote that “any tribesman might become a shaman” after going on a “vision quest” and having an apparition signifying his adoption by a particular spirit. ¹⁷

In such societies, as Lowie wrote of the Crow, “the greater or lesser dignity” of aspiring shamans depended “on the pragmatic test of their efficacy.” If their curing spells were followed by cures or their rainmaking rituals by rain, their credibility grew. Thus Crow men who, after receiving a vision, were “conspicuously fortunate in war parties would come to be regarded as favorites of some powerful being.” But pity the Crow who, as Lowie recounted, felt inspired by his adoptive spirit to introduce a new effigy into the Sun Dance. When “its use was accompanied by the death of the chief dancer’s wife,” this inspiration was unmasked as a “pretended revelation.” ¹⁸

Competition for shamanhood has rarely been as egalitarian as among the Crow. In some societies being a famous shaman’s descendant gave you a leg up, and circumstances of birth could help in other ways, too; entering the world amid a violent storm or with an odd birthmark might be a sign. In parts of Siberia, effeminate boys were good prospects, and once they were shamans some dressed as women and married a man. ¹⁹ Eerie early achievements—having a weird and prescient dream, surviving a lightning strike or a snakebite—could in some societies mark a shamanic prospect.

However they arrived at their stations, shamans everywhere, to keep their credibility high, had to muster ongoing displays of supernatural power. But how could they do that, given the seeming falseness of their supernatural beliefs?

In some realms, a high batting average is inherently likely. Among the Aranda of central Australia, one of the shaman’s jobs was ensuring that solar eclipses would be temporary—nice work if you can get it. ²⁰ And since most illnesses are, like eclipses, temporary, the average shamanic medical intervention is also likely to be vindicated. Among the Semang on the Malay Peninsula, the following shamanic procedure proved effective in exorcising the evil spirit from a sick woman: uproot two young trees, take soil from the resulting holes, rub it on her body, spit on her, then forcefully throw the trees into the jungle. ²¹

Success rates are especially high in societies where shamans have the option of turning down particularly dire cases. ²² Further career protection comes via philosophical loopholes. Among the Guiana native Americans, the blame for a patient’s death fell on destiny, not the shaman. ²³ In Australia and many other places, a failed shamanic intervention could be attributed to the countervailing sorcery of some hostile shaman. ²⁴ A Tlingit shaman, having failed to cure a patient, might blame it on someone he identified as a witch, who would then either confess under torture or be killed. ²⁵

Notwithstanding these reputation-preserving features of the shaman’s practice, faith in even a reputable shaman isn’t unshakable. On the Andaman Islands, Edward Horace Man observed in the nineteenth century, the death of a shaman’s child was seen as a “sign that his power is waning,” and he would now be under pressure to show “further proof of his supposed superiority” lest the public’s awe should fade. ²⁶

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